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Tightening Washington's Inner Circle

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WASHINGTON — According to Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, who stepped down last week as chief representative to the United Nations, "they are the highest, frankest, most authoritative discussions of United States foreign policy." She was talking about the meetings of President Reagan's National Security Council which she regularly attended, but which her successor, Lieut. Gen. Vernon A. Walters, will not, at least not on a regular basis. Secretary of State George P. Shultz, who wanted to limit the power of the U.N. reprsentative, won the White House's agreement not to renew the N.S.C. pass for General Walters.

So upset was General Walters at losing the privilege of attending all N.S.C. sessions, that he reportedly came close last week to resigning even before the Senate had had a chance to approve his nomination.

It was the kind of story that could be understood only by those familiar with how power is perceived in Washington. General Walters had already been assured that he would have full Cabinet status, carrying on the anachronistic tradition started by President Eisenhower, who decided to put his campaign adviser, Henry Cabot Lodge, in the Cabinet as well as at the United Nations.

Mr. Eisenhower had no grand strategy in suddenly elevating his U.N. ambassador to Cabinet status; he simply wanted to have Mr. Lodge around the White House. To outsiders, Cabinet status might seem the ultimate one could hope to achieve. That might have been true in 19th century Washington, but the reality of life in Washington these days is that Cabinet meetings, in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Adviser to President Carter, are "almost useless." Mr. Brzezinski said they were so boring that he used to catch up surreptitiously on his light reading by placing magazines on his knees during the meetings. They are no more lively in this Administration where President Reagan has been known to doze off at the meetings from time to time, according to his aide Michael Deaver.

Thus, being a Cabinet member, while symbolically important, may have less panache than meets the eye. Power in Washington is counted in terms of information. The more secret and restricted the information is, the more a person with access to it counts. Henry A. Kissinger, National Security Advisor to President Nixon, rose so quickly to prominence because Mr. Nixon and he closely hoarded the most important diplomatic and military secrets. Since N.S.C. meetings, by their nature, are highly restricted, with the agenda of the sessions itself a classified secret, just being allowed to attend earns the participant additional standing. But beyond that, the council decides things. Often the decisions are worked out behind the scenes by the President and two or three of his key advisers, but nevertheless, the N.S.C, does vote on critical matters of war and peace.

Under the law that created the N.S.C. in 1947, the only statutory members are the President, the Vice President, the Secretary of State and the Defense Secretary. The Director of Central Intelligence and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are statutory advisers. All others, including the national security adviser, have to be invited. For some like Mrs. Kirkpatrick, Edwin Meese 3d, the former counsellor, now Attorney General, James A. Baker 3d, the former chief of staff and now Treasury Secretary, and Mr. Deaver, the deputy chief of staff, the invitation was a standing one. Others attend as needed, depending on the topic. Presumably, General Walters would be called in if some crucial United Nations-related matter were to be discussed or if problems in Latin America or North Africa, on which he has expertise, were on the table.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick said it was "very useful to me to be a member of the N.S.C." because being able "to hear the discussions gave me a kind of sense of confidence about the goals of the President, the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense." It also allowed her the chance to voice her own views. During the war between Argentina and Britain over the Falkland Islands in 1982, Mrs. Kirkpatrick, who was sympathetic to Argentina, regularly engaged in debate with then Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. "Our positions were unreconcilable," he said later.

Mr. Shultz is reported to have found himself, like Mr. Haig, in occasional debate with Mrs. Kirkpatrick at the council, and was uneasy with the idea that the U.N. representative should be able to challenge her superior at N.S.C. meetings. He saw the U.N. representative as just another Presidential ambassador, who should take orders from the President and his chief foreign policy manager, the Secretary of State.

If General Walters is unhappy with his status, he is following a grand tradition. President Kennedy, trying to head off liberal appeals for Adlai Stevenson to be made secretary of state, persuaded him to take the U.N. job, as America's representative to the world, but then cut him out of important information and decision-making, leaving him frustrated and angry. Arthur Goldberg was asked by President Johnson to give up his Supreme Court seat to become the U.N. representative, with the pledge that he could work to end the Vietnam war. Instead, Mr. Goldberg, despite important diplomatic work on ending the 1967 Middle East war, had little to say in the Vietnam negotiations.